

Sweeney Ridge

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Golden Gate National Recreation Area



Morton Kunstler/San Mateo County History Museum

In Their Footsteps

Sweeney Ridge bears the footsteps of explorers, soldiers and citizen activists, as well as an occasional mountain lion. All who have visited Sweeney Ridge over time have shaped its history and left their mark. As you follow their footsteps, we hope you discover what drew people to this magnificent place and why this land was important to them.

Discovery & Disappointment

Have you ever been lost, only to discover something unexpected? Spanish explorer Captain Juan Gaspar de Portolá, on a mission to settle Monterey, found himself in that position atop Sweeney Ridge on November 4, 1769. Relying on a sailor’s exaggerated description, Portolá didn’t recognize Monterey even as he stood upon its sands, so he continued northward. Lost and ailing, his expedition eventually scaled what we now call Sweeney Ridge and saw “...a large arm of the sea... some sort of harbor there within the mountains.” Ironically it had taken a land expedition to find what seafaring explorers never discovered—the San Francisco Bay. Though Portolá had become the first European to see the bay, he realized he had missed Monterey, and so wrote of his historic day simply: “We traveled for three hours, the entire road was bad, we halted without water.” Despite Portolá’s initial disappointment, the Spanish soon

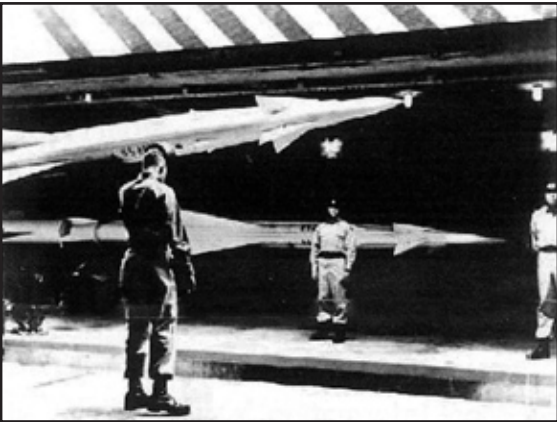
recognized the value of the region. By 1776 they had established the Presidio of San Francisco, which protected the Bay Area for the next two centuries under the Spanish, Mexican and American flags.



Map of Father Pedro Font, 1777

Fear Factor

All of us have felt fear at some time. During the 1950s, Cold War-era fears of Soviet long-range “Bear” bombers caused the U.S. Army to develop a weapon to destroy those planes. Nike anti-aircraft missiles were deployed across the country, including 11 sites protecting the Bay Area. Nike Site SF-51 included a control station atop Sweeney Ridge and a missile launching site at nearby Milagra Ridge. By the 1960s, nuclear capable Nike Hercules missiles stood guard on this ridgetop. Obsolete by 1974, SF-51 was abandoned under the provisions of an arms-reduction treaty.



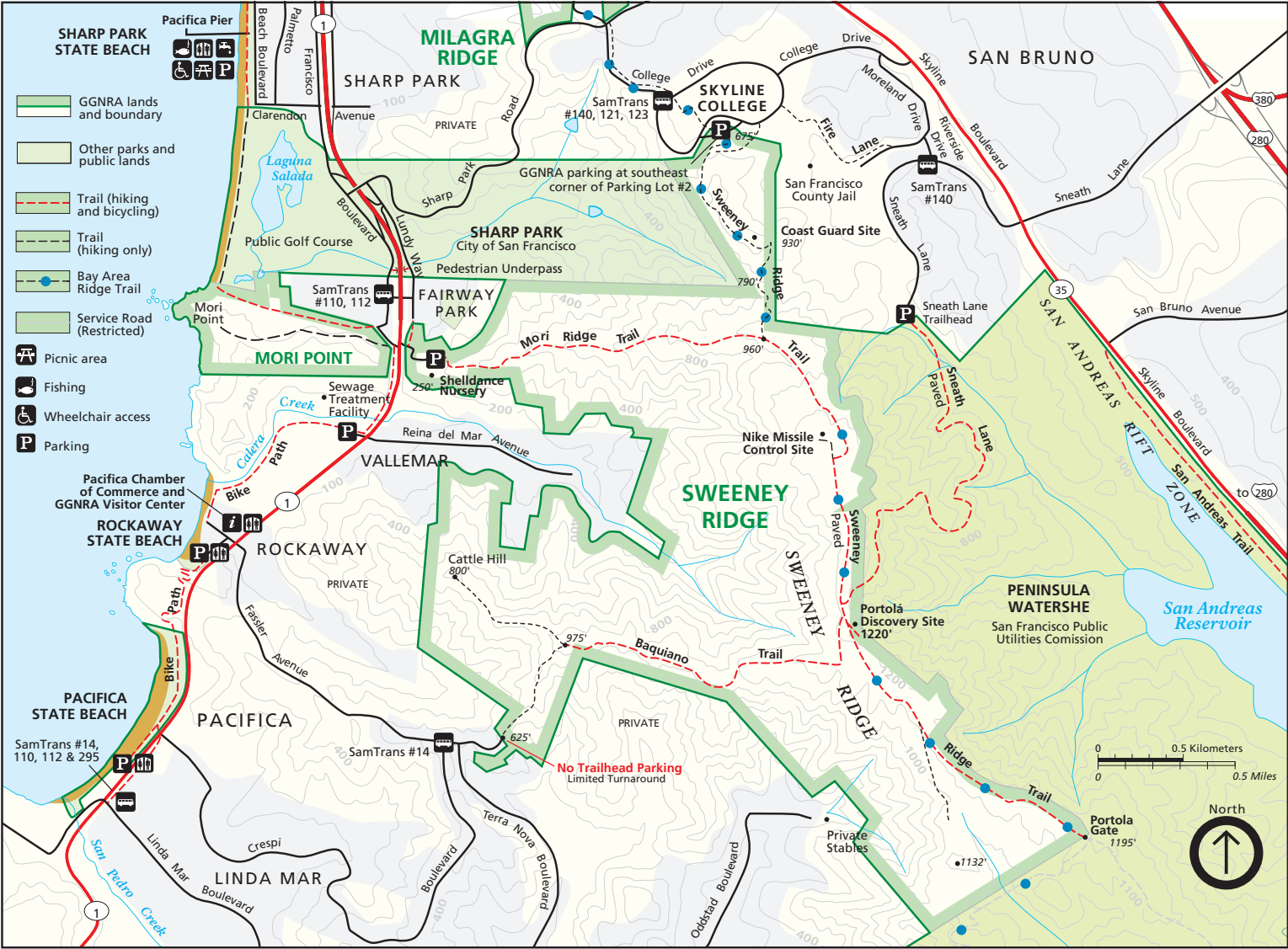
Soldiers guard Nike missiles. U.S. Army photo

Protecting Their Priorities



In the 1970s and 80s, local citizens recognized new threats to Sweeney Ridge in the housing developments sprawling up nearby hillsides and a proposed 8-lane freeway extension bisecting the ridge. Community activists organized, signed petitions and voted to protect this 1200-acre ridgetop. Many of

these same citizen activists now volunteer to improve wildlife habitat, maintain trails and lead walks.



Ranging on the Ridge



Mountain lions find refuge on Sweeney Ridge.
California Academy of Sciences

Like their human counterparts, wildlife explore and defend territories. Here on Sweeney Ridge the web of life is remarkably intact: mountain lions, coyotes and bobcats range in search of rabbits, mice, voles and shrews, which in turn search for food and water sources of their own. And all these creatures find protection in Sweeney Ridge’s native coastal scrub vegetation. This entire ecosystem is protected by the National Park

Service. Today, volunteers protect habitat here against invasive, non-native plants that threaten this delicate ecological balance by displacing the native plants on which wildlife depend.

About Your Visit

Please continue the protection of Sweeney Ridge by staying on designated trails and picking up litter. Mountain bikes are allowed on fire roads, but not on single-track trails. Dogs on leash are allowed. Fires, camping,

and off-road vehicles are not permitted. Finally, protect yourself: though Spring and Fall offer the best weather, wear layered clothing year round as temperatures can change rapidly. Bring sunscreen and water.

Finding Your Way

From Pacifica, Sweeney Ridge trailheads are located at Shelldance Nursery off of Highway 1, and at the east end of Fassler Avenue. From San Bruno, trails start from the west end of Sneath Lane off of Hwy 35 (Skyline Blvd), and from Skyline College Parking Lot #2.

For More Information

- Pacifica Visitor Center**
(650) 355-4122
www.pacificachamber.com
 - Presidio Visitor Center**
(415) 561-4323
www.nps.gov/prsf
 - Site Stewardship Program**
(415) 561-3073
www.parksconservancy.org
- For disabled access call (415) 556-8371



Cover: Artist’s conception of the Portolá expedition’s first sighting of San Francisco Bay from Sweeney Ridge in 1769.